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A Critical Inquiry into the Physical Appearance of Emperor Ashoka

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Abstract: *The visual evolution of Emperor Ashoka's (c. 304–232 BCE) likeness presents a unique case study in the invention of imperial memory in ancient India. Moving beyond the aniconism of Mauryan state art, this article charts the emergence and standardization of Ashoka's iconography across three major early Buddhist art schools: the* ***Aniconic-Narrative*** *style of* ***Sanchi*** *(1st century BCE), the* ***Labeled Portraiture*** *of* ***Kanaganahalli*** *in the Deccan (1st-2nd century CE), and the* ***Hellenistic-Narrative*** *tradition of* ***Gandhara*** *(1st-3rd century CE). By analyzing newly integrated evidence from Amaravati, Kanaganahalli, and Sanchi alongside established Gandharan reliefs, this paper argues that Ashoka's visual identity was not a linear development but a simultaneous, regionally distinct response to a shared textual tradition (the Ashokavadana cycle). Crucially, the* ***Kanaganahalli portrait****, bearing the inscription "Rāyā Asoko," provides the only named, contemporary depiction, serving as a vital anchor point. This comparative analysis reveals how Ashoka was variously fashioned into a narrative actor, a devotional donor, and a political archetype, ultimately solidifying his role as the paradigmatic chakravartin-patron in the Buddhist imagination, centuries after his death.*

Keywords: Ashoka, Buddhist Art, Iconography, Mauryan Empire, Sanchi, Kanaganahalli, Amaravati, Gandhara, *Ashokavadana*, *Chakravartin*.

Introduction: The Problem of the Invisible Emperor

The quest for Ashoka's historical appearance is an encounter with deliberate absence. His own edicts, the primary sources of his reign, erasure his physical form, promoting instead the disembodied voice of *dhamma*. Yet, within two centuries of his death, his figure began to populate the narrative reliefs of Buddhist *stupas* across the subcontinent. This study investigates this transformative process, arguing that Ashoka's "portrait" is a composite, karmically and politically charged construct. By integrating key visual evidence from Sanchi, Amaravati, Kanaganahalli, and Gandhara, we can map a dialectic between text, regional artistic idiom, and devotional need that gave birth to one of India's most enduring imperial icons.

1. The Foundational Silence: Mauryan Aniconism and the Edicts

Ashoka's own material program established the paradigm of self-effacement. The polished pillars, lion capitals, and rock-cut edicts symbolize cosmic authority and moral proclamation, not personal glorification.[1] The king's body is sublimated into the body politic and the *dhamma*. This strategic invisibility makes the later profusion of his image not a recovery, but an invention.

2. The Textual Blueprint

The legends compiled in texts like the *Ashokavadana* (c. 5th century CE) provided the narrative raw material.[2] It is noted that it's most of the stories are highly fabricated but some stories backed by other

legends like stories of his past life as Jaya offering dust and his relic veneration offered artists a rich repertoire of scenes. These texts described moral states, not physiognomy, allowing regional workshops immense creative liberty in visualizing the king.

3. Regional Responses: Three Modes of Depiction

3.1 Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh, c. 1st Century BCE): The Aniconic-Narrative King

At Sanchi, Ashoka is present through action and association, not portraiture.

- **The Visitation Trope:** At the Great Stupa, a relief on the Southern Gateway famously depicts a royal procession approaching a tree-shrine, interpreted as **Ashoka's visit to the Bodhi tree** at Bodh Gaya.[3] The king is the central figure in a chariot, his features generic. More significantly, a nearby panel on the same gateway shows a royal couple venerating a *stupa* within a river, teeming with nagas. This is unanimously identified as **"Ashoka's visit to the Ramagrama stupa."**[4] Here, the king and queen are typological figures, their identity conveyed solely by their interaction with the legendary relic monument. Sanchi establishes Ashoka as a narrative actor within the sacred geography of Buddhism.
- **The Donor Portrait (Sanchi Stupa 2):** A small, weathered statue of a standing male figure is traditionally identified as Ashoka,[5] though this is speculative. Its importance lies in its potential as a very early, freestanding representation of a royal donor at a *stupa* site, a conceptual precursor to later, labeled portraits.

1 Ashoka supported his two queens at Sanchi, in grief as he saw the pipal tree dying out as it is not being taken care of by Queen Tyshyarakshita

2 Ashoka's visit to the Ramagrama stupa Sanchi Stupa 1 Southern gateway

3.2 Kanaganahalli (Karnataka, c. 1st-2nd Century CE): The Labeled Portrait

The discovery at Kanaganahalli represents a revolutionary moment in Ashokan studies.

- **The Inscribed Portrait:** A limestone frieze depicts a portly, bearded king surrounded by two queens and female attendants. The Prakrit label in Brahmi script is unequivocal: **"Rāyā Asoko" – King Ashoka.**[6] This is the earliest and only incontrovertible named portrait of the emperor from antiquity.

3 Below this figure is an inscription in Brahmi script that reads 'Ranyo Asoka'

- **Significance of the Archetype:** His appearance—stout, with short curly hair and a beard, adorned with simple jewelry—conforms to a Satavahana-period ideal of male royalty. It is not a Mauryan likeness but a contemporary (to the Satavahanas) visualization of a great king of the past. This image canonizes Ashoka as the **donor-king par excellence**, his corporeal presence legitimizing the *stupa* itself.

4 Ashoka depicted on the pillar of the main stupa.-Vidisha -Madhya Pradesh

3.3 Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh, c. 1st Century BCE – 1st Century CE): The Narrative Embellishment

The Amaravati school, like Sanchi, used narrative to define the king.

- **The Ramagrama Scene:** A detailed relief now in the Guimet Museum (Paris) depicts the **underwater *stupa* at Ramagrama.**[7] A royal figure (Ashoka) stands on the riverbank with attendants, gazing at the *stupa* inhabited by nagas. The artistry is more elaborate than at Sanchi, with flowing lines and heightened drama, but the king remains a standardized, graceful figure within the narrative.
- Amaravati, now in the British Museum, is interpreted as the **"Distribution of the Relics."**[8] While the central figure is a *chakravartin*, it is often anachronistically associated with Ashoka, demonstrating how his legend colonized earlier Buddhist narratives.

5 Ashoka as Chakravarti Samrat (Universal Ruler) with his seven jewels- Queen, Horse, Elephant, Treasurer, Army Chief, Chintamani (wish-fulfilling jewel) and Chakra. 1st Century BCE, Limestone. From Jaggayyapeta Stupa. Now on display at National Museum, New Delhi

6 Ashoka as Chakravarti Samrat, circa 1st century BC, from the Amaravathi village, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh (India), in the Guimet Museum (Paris)

3.4 Gandhara (North-West, c. 1st-3rd Century CE): The Hellenistic Archetype

As analyzed by Mahmood-ul-Hasan (2017), Gandharan art provides the most prolific and detailed narrative cycles.[9]

- **Standardized Royalty:** In panels depicting the **"Handful of Dust," "Submission of the Malla Chiefs,"** and the **"Visit to Ramagrama,"** Ashoka is consistently shown as a robust, bearded monarch in Kushan-era attire (tunic, trousers, heavy cloak).[10] His features are Greco-Roman influenced—wavy hair, defined anatomy—yet generic.

The most popular legend in Gandhara Art was the gift of earth offered by Asoka to Buddha in his previous birth. "It was a daily custom of the Buddha, who enjoined the same upon his monks, to wander abroad at a certain hour in quest of food, as the whole Order were dependent for their sustenance upon the voluntary offerings of the pious" (Hargreaves, 1930: 37, 38). Once arriving from the Kalandakavana, the Buddha enters Rajagrha in order to beg for his food. His entry into the town is marked by several wonders. Two little boys, Jaya and Vijaya, are playing in the road and amusing themselves with making houses and granaries out of earth. On seeing the Buddha, Jaya respectfully offers him a handful of earth; Vijaya, his hands joined, approves his companion's action. The Buddha predicts to Ananda that, one hundred years after his Nirvana, young Jaya will be the holy king Asoka, who will reign in Pataliputra over the whole of India and will build 84,000 stupas; Vijaya will be his minister, with the name of Radhagupta.

Offering of the handful dust-Chatpat(PeriodII)

OOFERING OF HANDFUL OF DUST, NIMOGRAM, SWAT MUSEUM

Offering of handful dust (Peshawar Museum)

OFFERING OF THE HANDFUL OF DUST (Swat Museum)

- **Function:** Gandhara crystallizes Ashoka's role as the **political enforcer of *dharma*** (subduing chiefs) and the **awestruck devotee** (at Ramagrama). His appearance is that of a Kushan-era ideal king, legitimizing current rule through the lens of the past.

7 The episode of the submission of the seven chieftains is represented in a panel recovered from Charg Pate, Dir now in the collection of the Peshawar University Museum, Inv. No..CGP-1981-1-66(CGP 1). Oblong panel framed on left side with an encased Corinthian pilaster, a plain fillet runs on the bottom. The panel shows two scenes; in the foreground is the scene of the submission of seven chieftains of Kusinagari, Vaisali, Kapilavastu, Pava, Calakalapa and Ramagrama before Asoka Raja. The King Asoka is sitting crossed legs on a throne under a parasol. Head of the king is missing; left hand rests on the knee while with right hand the king is touching his necklace. A figure on the back of the throne is holding a flywhisk. In front of the king is a kneeling princely figure/noble in anjalimudra (a gesture of veneration or subjugation). Behind the kneeling figure are two princely figures with elaborate turbans, wearing earrings, heavy necklaces of beads and clad in princely attire; right hands of both figures are raised up to their chest, heads are slightly bowed to express respect. In the second row are three princely figures, from right side first two figures are standing in the same manner as preceding figures, while the third is in anjalimudra, behind this is the seventh princely figure. In the background are armed soldiers riding on camel and war Elephant. The soldiers are wearing turbans forming three strands around the head, while, end of the turbans is fastened beneath the chins. A figure with similar turban is standing in front of the elephant

ASOKA'S VISIT TO UNDERWATER NAGA'S STUPA (Charg Patai)

8 A relief panel recovered from Charg Pati bearing Inv.No.CGP- 1981-1-67(CGP 2). Now in the collection of the University Museum, Peshawar depicts scene of the visit of Asoka Raja to the underwater stupa of Ramagrama. In the middle of the panel is a stupa constructed on a square base, base has low molding on the base and top. Drum of the stupa is plain having molding around the upper edge. Above molding a balustrade is running all around the dome which recalls the balustrade of the great stupa of Sanchi. Dom of the stupa is decorated with wavy lines and eglantines within squares. Harmica and two umbrellas above the dome are damaged. Two high pillars surmounted by lion figures are seen on either side of the stupa. On the right side of the stupa, Asoka Raja is sitting crossed legs on a throne; a footrest is placed under his feet. Face of the king is badly chipped off; left hand rests on thigh, while with right hand the king is pointing towards the stupa. On the left side of the stupa is a female sitting on a stool with clasped hands in the pose of veneration. A female donor is standing in front of the sitting female with offering in her hands. The sitting woman is keenly looking the offering. In the background, on the either side of the stupa two nagas are shown worshipping the stupa. Faces and hoods of both nagas are chipped off but traces of hoods behind the head are clearly visible

ASOKA'S VISIT TO UNDERWATER STUPA OF NAGAS (Shaikhan Dheri)

9 Another Another example of the same legend was unearthed from Sheikhan Dheri. A small arched panel in grey schist measuring 30 x 29 x 4 cm bearing inventory No.PM-2840(old:203) depicts a stupa with square base having incased flowers decoration, a staircase provides approach to the pradakshinapatha around the drum. Two serpents are shown wrapped around the drum, with their hoods up in the air. Dom of the stupa is decorated with inverted lotus petals and surmounted by harmica and three chatras (parasols). On the left side of the panel is shown Asoka Raja gazing the serpents with wonder. Behind the king is another male figure in anjalimudra. On the right side of the stupa are two figures in anjalimudra, the figure in foreground is a shaven headed Buddhist monk

4. Comparative Analysis: The Anatomy of an Icon

A side-by-side examination reveals a concerted effort to create a recognizable, yet adaptable, imperial figure:

Region/ Site	Period	Ashoka's Depicted Role	Artistic Archetype
Sanchi	1st cent. BCE	Pilgrim-Devotee	Generic Indian royalty (aniconic-narrative)
Amaravati	1st cent. BCE/CE	Reverent Witness, Universal Emperor	Slender, graceful Satavahana-style figure
Kanaganahalli	1st-2nd cent. CE	Donor-Patron (Dānapati)	Portly, bearded Satavahana king (labeled portrait)
Gandhara	1st-3rd cent. CE	*Chakravartin*-Devotee & Enforcer	Hellenistic-influenced Kushan royalty

Conclusion: The Synthesis of a Saint-King

The search for the historical Ashoka's face ends not with a discovery, but with the recognition of a profound process of cultural fabrication. From the narrative implications at Sanchi and Amaravati, to the definitive labeling at Kanaganahalli, to the elaborate storytelling in Gandhara, a consensus emerged. **Ashoka's visual identity was built not on physiognomic memory, but on functional need:** the need to embody the ideal patron, to illustrate sacred texts, and to connect contemporary dynasties (Satavahanas, Kushans) to a golden age of *dharmic* rule.

The **Kanaganahalli portrait** is the keystone, proving that by the 1st-2nd century CE, a specific visual model for "King Ashoka" was in circulation and deemed authoritative enough to label. This model was then adapted regionally. Thus, Ashoka's true "appearance" is this very polyphony of forms—a karmic king whose constructed image served to unify the Buddhist world's memory of its greatest royal benefactor, transforming the invisible Mauryan emperor into an eternal, and eternally recognizable, icon of pious kingship. The greatest political and spiritual figure of ancient India, Asoka known to the history as: "Asoka, the beloved of the gods, of amiable expression, king of Magadha" (Lamotte, 1988: 223). Asoka is remembered in the history for services he rendered for the welfare of his subjects. His acts of piety and zealous efforts for promotion of Buddhism in the sub-continent and adjoining countries, his reforms in dharma and sangha. In Buddhist legend, Asoka was seen as a relic venerator. His most famous legendary deed was his redistribution of the Buddha relics from the Drona reliquaries into 84,000 stupas The Yaksas who were under his orders were dispersed all over Jambudvipa and built 84,000 stupas in which the caskets were placed. The Sthavira Yasas, abbot of the Kukkutarama, gave the signal to start work by hiding the sun with his hand, and all the stupas were completed at the same time. Their construction earned Asoka the "King of the right Law" (Lamotte 1988, p.240). As a result, for generations, Buddhist pilgrims, coming across ancient stupas, have thought of them as "Asokan stupas," (Strong, 1948:124). After Buddha the most favorite and venerable personality for the Buddhist of Gandhara was Asoka, under whom

patronage the dharma of peace was reached to them. The sculptors of Gandhara immortalized the noble acts of Asoka by portraying them in the Buddhist Art of Gandhara.

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[5] *Ashoka and his two queens at Sanchi*, Sanchi Stupa 2.
[6]Poonacha, K.P., *Excavations at Kanaganahalli*, ASI, 2013.
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[9] Hasan, Mahmood-ul. "Depiction of Asoka Raja in the Buddhist Art of Gandhara." *JRSP* 54, no. 2 (2017).
[10] Ibid. See figures for "Handful of Dust" (Chatpat, Nimogram) and "Submission of Malla Chiefs" (Charg Pate).

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